

LONG TERM Food Storage

By Jackie Clay

You don't have to wait for nuclear war, depression, or some other doomsday scenario to get your family and home ready for bad times. There are floods, ice storms, droughts, power outages, and other "acts of God" around our country on any given week.

So, to avoid panic and discomfort, we know it is provident and wise to stock up on those items for not only survival, but reasonable comfort and happiness, should we need to live off what we have stored in our pantry, root cellar, basement, or attic.

Remember, hard times or other emergencies seldom, if ever, give advance warning.

Now, we know we should rotate the foods we store in order to have wholesome foods to choose from. But just how long are foods actually good?

Some items at the store have a "freshness date" and it is commonly believed that after that date the products will not be good. And even preparedness companies cite a shelf life of five years in their storable foods. Then along comes some strange per-

son, such as myself, who tells a different tale. As a long-time survivalist and home canner, with nothing to lose or



Tins and sealed jars hold dry foods such as beans, peas, corn, pasta, and seeds for future gardens.

gain from telling you anything but the truth, you might listen to my experiences.

I have always kept at least a two year supply of food stored against bad times, whether it be an illness, injury, loss of a job, storm, or worse. This is a practice I learned from my parents and grandparents who lived through and learned from the Depression. Every year I home-can hundreds of jars of food, most filled with home-raised produce and meat, some with meat from hunting, some with items pur-

chased at great sales at the market throughout the year.

In one year we canned two deer, a tremendous tomato crop in another, a bumper apple crop in yet another, and so on. I

always can all I am able, as in other years the crop may not be so good and the hunting may be sparse. In this way, my pantry leapfrogs, as we do not consume all of last year's canned food. So, through the years, the canned goods build and build, and despite rotating the shelves to try to use up the oldest, our supply

expands.

Likewise, other pantry supplies, bought from the stores, grows and grows as one great sale follows another.

Okay, the bottom line: Just how long will this stuff keep? Do I really have to throw it to the chickens after a year? Two years? Five years? The answer is one word.

No.

Canned goods

No matter what you read in canning books (the newer ones, of course), on labels, in magazines, and no matter

what your neighbor or friend tells you, canned foods will last nearly indefinitely.

Now, you *must* store all canned foods, including home canned foods, in a cool, dark, dry place for optimum shelf life. Storing them in hot, light conditions will sometimes result in changes in texture, color, and taste as well as hasten the breakdown of vitamins. (It is this breakdown in vitamins that most often gives the warning, which sounds so dire: *use before December 1999, etc.*)

It is true that most canned foods will lose some vitamin content. But if you've ever been hungry—I mean real hungry—you don't worry if the vitamin C in the canned tomatoes is below national standards. Besides, we figure we make up any vitamin shortfall with the fresh produce we eat nearly every day from the garden.

Storing canned foods in damp conditions, as often found in basements or root cellars, can shorten the shelf life, and sooner or later the cans and jar tops will rust, weaken, and the contents will spoil. If this is your only storage facility, be certain to use up any cans or tins that are beginning to rust before they go bad and always check such containers for mold, cloudiness, odor, or an unsealed or bulging condition. All indicate spoiled foods. Likewise, boil all vegetables or meats for 15 minutes to kill pathogens, even if not apparent. Just to be sure.

I have home-canned jars of food that are at least 20 years old, which we use from time to time. For instance the cherries we picked from Dad's orchard, which we parcel out frugally until we get our own trees bearing. These foods taste, smell, and look great, despite their age. Plenty good for an emergency situation, for sure.

Dry goods

Okay, let's move on to the more nebulous items, such as dry goods, like flours, dry milk, sugar, etc. Will



A full pantry is great insurance.

all of these store indefinitely as well? Yes and no, depending on the product. Let's start with those that have an extremely long shelf life, given good storage practices. By this I mean kept dry, sealed, and stored in a fairly cool, dry, dark location.

Beans, dry peas, wheat, and other dry grains, unprocessed, will keep in storage a long, long time. I have some beans that are more than 700 years old, and they still germinate and grow.

You know I could eat them, if I wanted to. But, of course, I don't as they are treasures from the past.

Because these grains store so long, it is best to store whole grains, including corn, and grind them as needed. For once they are ground, the shelf life decreases, often dramatically. Take whole wheat flour and corn meal for instance. Both of these products can become rancid after a period of from two weeks to a few years, because of the oils in them.

White flour from the store has been "processed," which removes the oily germ and, of course, much of the nutrition. Therefore, it will store for a much longer time than will whole wheat flour. My grandmother did not like to use fresh white flour, preferring to use older flour as it baked better.

Right now, I'm using a bin of six-year-old white flour, and it is fine. I do sift it twice to fluff it up because when it sits in the bag for a long time, it settles and packs together. Without the extra sifting, it bakes pretty solid biscuits and bread. Corn meal will usually last, unrancid, for about a year or two in a sealed glass jar.

Other than dampness, a bag of flour or grain's worst enemy is the meal moth. This little bugger is a small, nondescript greyish moth who gets into our grain and lays eggs which hatch out into flour weevils, ruining the flour in a short time. The first sign of weevils are tiny dark specks in the flour, followed by webbing in the can or jar. The moths initially come into our pantry in a bag of flour with a small tear, hole, or unglued section of bag.

Always thoroughly check all new bags of flour or meal at the store, rejecting any that have a tiny leak. Taping the hole at the store is not a cure. Buy solid bags, and immediately get them into good, airtight storage. For long term storage, I put two 25-pound sacks in a good food grade garbage bag, stick a few bay leaves in for good measure, and seal the bag with duct tape. The bay leaves dis-

courage any moths that could possibly get into the sealed plastic bag. These sacks are then either stored in a clean garbage can or sturdy cardboard box, which is also taped shut when full.

I usually freeze five-gallon pails of whole grains in case some minute friends are hitching a ride in our food. The freezing kills them before they become a problem.

It is a very good idea to buy a package of meal moth lures/traps, which attract the moths before they attack your stored flours. The cost is minimal and they do afford good protection. These traps sit discreetly on your pantry shelf, trapping any moths that happen by.

Sugars will last indefinitely. They must be kept dry and sealed to prevent hardening. When I store brown sugar, I dampen a piece of folded washcloth and place it on top of the sugar, then seal the jar. This keeps the sugar from hardening, which is a problem with brown sugar. If a bag or jar of sugar does get hard or crumbly, it is still good, although a bit inconvenient. Just warm up the sugar and add it to the liquid in the recipe to soften it.

Dry milk, dry eggs, dry margarine and butter powder, cheese powder, and powdered cheese sauce are foods that keep very well, if unopened and well sealed. I buy dry eggs, powdered cheese, margarine, orange drink mix, and many other long-storage items from a preparedness company as they are sealed in #10 cans.

I've used some of these foods that were seven-years-old and older and all were perfectly fine. And I've used dry milk from the store which was well sealed and stored for 10 years on our pantry shelf. The milk smelled and tasted normal and resulted in great pancakes, rolls, and sauces.

Home dehydrated vegetables and dehydrated vegetables purchased from preparedness companies in #10 cans make an excellent lightweight, nutritious, long-term storage item. I dehydrate everything from sliced potatoes and corn to tomatoes and peppers.



The author picks some cukes for pickles to add to the pantry.

Perfectly dried and securely sealed, they will last for years.

I buy two one-pound foil bags of granulated dry yeast at a time. One I open and pour into a jar, which is stored in the fridge. The other is stored, unopened, in the freezer compartment of the fridge. As yeast only keeps a shelf life of about a year, unrefrigerated, I rotate this yearly, using the frozen yeast to replace the one in the refrigerator at the end of the year and buying a new one for the freezer. But, in an emergency, one can always use a bit of this old yeast or even develop wild yeast to make a sourdough starter.

Salt will keep forever if stored with care.

Baking powder will keep well a long time if stored properly. In fact, the can of Rumford I'm using now was purchased five years ago and it just sits on my shelf. And if it starts to weaken, you can just add a bit more or boost it by adding warm liquid to the mix. Baking soda lasts even longer. I'm using some off the pantry shelf that is nine, count 'em, nine years old. And no one has ever whined about my cooking.

More perishable foods

How about more perishable foods? When we lived on our remote homestead in Montana's high country, we were snowed in for at least six months out of the year, so preparation was a must. We learned that we could stick frozen stick margarine in a cooler we placed in a snowbank and have it last all winter. Unfrozen but refrigerated margarine would keep for about two months, then begin to pick up odors and tastes. We learned that tubs of margarine would keep for nearly all winter in a cold spot on the floor of our pantry, but we did need to protect it from not only our cats and an occasional mouse, but from the dogs as well. Butter lasts a much shorter time, unless kept strictly frozen.

Shortening, bought and kept sealed, will last many years before going rancid. I have used some that was 7 years-old, and it was fine.

Eggs are a big joke with us. Many folks insist on "fresh" eggs, throwing out those a few weeks old. I worked part time for an egg ranch. The fresh eggs were picked up weekly, hauled to a warehouse where they were distributed to wholesale companies, who kept them around awhile before trucking them to super markets where they were finally bought. How much time elapsed? Who knows?

We raise our own chickens but before we snowmobiled our day-old chicks up the mountain one April we had to buy eggs for the winter. We found that if we bought really fresh eggs from a rancher in November, we'd have good eggs in May. I did crack them into a cup, as an occasional one would be bad.

You can waterglass your eggs, but a crock full of those eggs is nasty to reach into. Kind of like dipping into snot for breakfast eggs. It takes your appetite away and it is a bit costly.

We found that keeping the eggs boxed in the fridge or cold corner of

the pantry was sufficient to keep them all winter. All eggs to be stored should be carefully inspected for even the most minute cracks as it can allow bacteria to penetrate the egg.

Without a flock of chickens to depend on, it is a good idea to have several #10 cans of powdered eggs on hand to be available in an emergency.

Just a note: home-raised eggs, fresh from the hen, are fine unrefrigerated for many days. I've found hidden nests in the weeds with eggs that have not been sat on by the hen yet, and though they sat out in 90° weather for as much as a week, I used them, finding every one was like it was fresh from the hen.

Meats and meat substitutes

Unless your family is vegetarian, meats in storage is necessary. No, I do not mean in the freezer, as no matter what "bad times" entail, the first thing to go is the power. Lose a job, get injured, not enough to pay the power bill, storms, earthquakes, fires, floods—all can quickly zap the power. While there are steps you can take to keep a freezer from thawing out quickly, they are not enough for a long-lasting emergency.

I have home canned meat for years, and found it extremely easy, quick, and convenient. Any canning book can help you get started today. This meat, including stews, soups, sauces, fish, poultry, and wild game will keep indefinitely if properly stored in that dark, dry, cool pantry.

Want to store meat before you get that two years' supply of home-canned meat on your shelf? Just look on your supermarket shelves. There's a lot to choose from: tuna, salmon, hash, chicken, ham, sauces, beef, and even bacon. For long-term storage I try to stay away from those convenient "pop tops" with a handy pull ring. They are nice, but can easily get unsealed in the hustle and rush of an emergency. You have to handle and



Another load of canned goods for the pantry

pack them very carefully, or the weakened area that pops can be poked, unsealing them, often without a sign it has happened. Yes, our family does have Spam on the shelves of our pantry, but I handle it very carefully. Soups, stews, canned spaghetti, and so forth, purchased from the store shelves, will also last indefinitely, if kept dry to prevent rusting.

Jerky? Well, to tell the truth, few people ever dry it long enough for safe, dependable long-term storage without canning it as well. In many climates, the meat goes bad or begins to mold in as little as two weeks without refrigeration. If it is dried to a brittle stick, it will keep longer, but it is like chewing on a piece of rawhide. Indians did it, but they were much less fussy than today's urban population.

A popular meat substitute that is lightweight, nutritious, tasty, and long keeping is a product called TVP (textured vegetable protein). You probably best recognize it as the bacon-bits that aren't really bacon. We keep about 15 pounds in factory sealed #10 cans or aluminum bags in our pantry. As most recipes only need about a quarter cup, you can see these lightweight crumbles last a long time.

They come in several flavors: chicken, beef, bacon, ham, and even taco. I've found that keeping several jars of dried soup base next to the TVPs makes a nice couple. Simply adding

the flavored soup base to soup, noodles, or whatever, then tossing in the matched TVP, makes a very quick, lightweight, satisfying, and *cheap* dinner, even on the go.

Snacks for storage

Okay, I know goodies may get raised eyebrows, but they sure make an emergency less depressing. Unfortunately, potato chips and other "normal" snacks are primarily grease which turns rancid pretty quickly. But there are still a lot of snacks out there perfect for the pantry. On the top of our list is home-dried fruit. I dry about as much as I can and have gallon jars of dried apples, apple bits, peaches, peach bits, strawberries, pineapple, apricots, pears, and more. I have 10-year old dried apples in a test jar and I've pulled out a few to nibble on each year for five years now. They are a bit brown, but still very tasty. (You can bet now I'm going to try Robert Williams' dried watermelon slices too—*BHM July/August 1998*). These dried fruits can either be eaten as a great snack, added to mixes such as pancake or muffin, or rehydrated and eaten soft and juicy.

Don't have a dehydrator yet? While you shop or build, you may want to consider dried fruit from the store. While quite expensive, it is readily available and there are good choices:



Shelves full of food. l to r: dried apple slices, pickles, onion bits, tomato sauce, peaches.

apples, prunes, raisins, cranberries, strawberries, apricots, pineapple, and more. The down side is that most are heavily laden with sugar, but they are light and tasty.

Jello and instant pudding mixes are another long-term storage goody. Lasting indefinitely, they make a great snack, treat, or reward.

Dried beverages, whether they be coffee, tea, or powdered drink mixes, all store well, even in very long-term plans. It is best, as in all the other above items, to rotate your stock, because powdered drinks, especially, have a tendency to cake. Of course they are still usable, but it doesn't take much to use the old stuff as you go and replace it with new.

Nuts and sealed packages of sunflower seeds make another great storage snack. They will usually last several years, factory sealed or home canned. Otherwise, they will become as rancid as those opened holiday salted nuts. I can a variety of nuts at home, especially walnuts and pecans from friends' orchards.

Search stores and preparedness catalogs for other snacks that sound good to you. A person can always experiment (before spending money stocking up on an item) with just about any food.

MREs? For those of you who are uninitiated, MRE stands for "meals ready to eat," a meal in a pouch developed for the military, with no cooking necessary. Here I'll put myself on the firing line and say they just plain cost

too much for this frugal person. They taste fairly good—about like a TV dinner—are reasonably nutritious, are certainly fast and easy to grab and run with, but they are expensive and heavy if you have to carry them.

However, their shelf life is quite good. It is claimed that they will store for five years, but I'd suspect quite a bit longer if kept away from heat. But, for the cost of an MRE to feed one person, I can fix a meal—a real meal where you get filled up—for four people, even in the boonies.

So there you have it—the truth according to Jackie on long-term food storage. Try it yourself and find out how creative your family can be. Mine certainly is.

Just remember these tips:

- 1. Keep food cool, dark, and dry.
- 2. Make sure the food is factory or home-sealed as well as it can be.
- 3. Rotate all storage food regularly, marking the date on which you entered each item into the pantry. Use the oldest first.
- 4. Don't be afraid to experiment.
- 5. Have fun.

After all, it's a real joy and very reassuring to know that your family can get by nearly any period of bad times, eating good, nutritious food that they enjoy. Δ

BEAUTIFUL LAKE FRONT HOME



Your own private boat dock extends into the lake from the beautiful manicured lawns. Custom 3 bdrm, 2 ½ bath, home includes office, large open living area with vaulted ceiling and massive view windows.

Such a scenic hideaway
for only \$213,500 H399

Attractive setting with manicured grounds and fruit trees, all on timed sprinklers. Make an appointment today to tour this beautiful recreation property!



Immaculate home on the lake front. Seawall near the dock to insure no erosion! The perfect place to dock your boat!

COLDWELL BANKER

CHRIS KUTZKEY, REALTORS
1288 S. Main St. #5, Yreka, CA
96097

530-842-7319